

O 091128Z MAR 09
FM AMEMBASSY COLOMBO
TO SECSTATE WASHDC IMMEDIATE 9539
INFO AMEMBASSY ATHENS
AMEMBASSY BANGKOK
AMEMBASSY DHAKA
AMEMBASSY ISLAMABAD
AMEMBASSY KATHMANDU
AMEMBASSY LONDON
AMEMBASSY NEW DELHI
AMEMBASSY OSLO
AMEMBASSY TOKYO
AMCONSUL CHENNAI
AMCONSUL MUMBAI
AMCONSUL TORONTO
USEU BRUSSELS
USMISSION USUN NEW YORK
USMISSION GENEVA
HQ USPACOM HONOLULU HI
DIA WASHINGTON DC
NATIONAL SECURITY COUNCIL WASHINGTON DC
SECDEF WASHDC
CDRUSARPAC FT SHAFTER HI//APCW/APOP//
CDR USPACOM HONOLULU HI//J3/J332/J52//

UNCLAS COLOMBO 000265

SENSITIVE

STATE FOR SCA (BOUCHER, CAMP), SCA/INS AND PRM
STATE ALSO PASS USAID
AID/W FOR ANE/SCA, DCHA/FFP (DWORKEN, KSHEIN)
AID/W FOR DCHA/OFDA (MORRISP, ACONVERY, RTHAYER, RKERR)
ATHENS FOR PCARTER
BANGKOK FOR USAID/DCHA/OFDA (WBERGER)
KATHMANDU FOR USAID/DCHA/OFDA AND POL (SBERRY)
GENEVA FOR RMA (NKYLOH, NHILGERT, MPITOTTI)
USUN NEW YORK FOR ECOSOC (D MERCADO)
SECDEF FOR OSD - POLICY
PACOM ALSO FOR J-5

E.O. 12958: N/A

TAGS: MOPS PREF PHUM PGOV PREL ASEC CE
SUBJECT: Northern Sri Lanka SitRep 28

Ref: A) Colombo 258 B) Colombo 250 C) Colombo 248 D) Colombo 247
E) Colombo 245 F) Colombo 240 G) Colombo 235 H) Colombo 230 I)
Colombo 217 J) Colombo 211 K) Colombo 208

¶1. (SBU) Summary: Both government and pro-Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) sources reported heavy fighting and high casualties after counterattacks by the remaining LTTE forces in and near Puthukkudiyiruppu (PTK) and Chalai. One source said the LTTE pushed back the Sri Lankan army about two kilometers near Chalai, north of the safe zone. A ship carrying 500MT of food aid arrived off the safe zone on March 8, but was turned around for weather reasons before the shipment could be fully offloaded. End Summary.

Heavy Fighting in PTK and Chalai

¶2. (SBU) Pro-LTTE websites boast of a counterattack against Sri Lankan Army (SLA) positions, which they claimed inflicted high casualties on the army in pitched fighting in and near Puthukkudiyiruppu. LTTE sources reported 450 army personnel killed, and 1,272 injured (PTK) in the period March 3-6. The Sri Lankan military reports killing 100 rebels on March 7-8. (Note: Both sides of the conflict frequently circulate inflated figures of casualties inflicted on the other side while downplaying their own losses.)

¶3. (SBU) According to one Embassy source, on March 7-8, the LTTE infiltrated cadres through SLA lines and pushed back the Sri Lankan army forward defense line by about two kilometers in the Chalai area, near the northern end of the safe zone.

Nationalist Faction:
US Should Not Evacuate Civilians

¶ 14. (SBU) Wimal Weerawansa, leader of the National Freedom Front (an ultra nationalist faction which broke away from the JVP to join the ruling coalition), released a statement on March 9 saying "U.S.-led international forces" should not be permitted to assist evacuation of civilians from the safe zone because the U.S. is "more interested in safeguarding the terrorist."

Partial Food Delivery to Trapped Civilians

¶ 15. (SU) Following Embassy interventions (Refs A and B), the Government provided a large-capacity ship for transportation of 500 MTs of food aid (nearly all of it from U.S.) to the safe zone. The fully-loaded ship, bearing an ICRC flag, departed Trincomalee on March 7 and arrived offshore of the safe zone on March 8. Past World Food Program shipments have not exceeded 40MT, so the 500MT shipment posed offloading challenges; there are a limited number of fishing boats available for transporting food from ship to shore. 144MT was offloaded on March 8. The offloading operation was expected to take three to five days in total; however, forecasts of bad weather forced the return of the ship to Trincomalee on March 9 before offloading all the food. There is no further information on when the ship will return. Mission Food for Peace officer estimates that once-weekly 500MT food shipments would provide adequate food

aid to the trapped population (estimated at 100,000 to 200,000 persons).

ICRC Reports Worsening Conditions in Safe Zone

¶ 16. (SBU) In a March 7 briefing to foreign heads of mission, the Deputy Country Director of the International Committee of the Red Cross characterized as a "fig leaf" efforts to date to assist trapped civilians. He reported that civilians were going hungry and were visibly losing weight. (Note: The Sri Lankan Health Ministry, however, issued a strongly-worded rebuttal disputing that there was any basis for reports of starvation deaths among civilians in the pocket of territory still controlled by the LTTE.) Of the roughly 3,000 civilians evacuated by ICRC since February 11, approximately 2,000 were "weapon-wounded." While the Government permitted ICRC to ship in antibiotics recently, it has not been enough. ICRC seeks Government permission to bring in expatriate technical experts, particularly in water/sanitation, as well as a field hospital, to buttress aid efforts. ICRC's urgent message was to "get more people out, get more assistance in" to the safe zone.

Reported Civilian Casualties

¶ 17. (SBU) Tamil sources from within the LTTE-controlled area report 209 civilians were killed in the period March 3-6, and 481 persons fled into Government-controlled territory on March 6-8. The Tamil National Alliance parliamentary group issued a statement claiming over 2,150 civilians have been killed by bombing campaigns carried out by the Sri Lankan armed forces since January 1, 2009. (Note: Such reports from Tamil sources cannot be confirmed and are frequently exaggerated.) The Ministry of Defense website reported 45 civilians fled the LTTE-controlled area on March 8.

¶ 18. (SBU) COMMENT: Both sides speak of heavy fighting and high casualties. This appears to undermine government claims that only about 500 LTTE cadres remain: it is not clear how such a small force would be capable of keeping government forces in the area numbering about 50,000 at bay while simultaneously preventing 100,000 to 200,000 civilians in the "safe zone" from fleeing. Heavy military action in Chalai will create further obstacles to the government's objective of creating a humanitarian corridor in that area for civilians to escape the fighting. Government sources said the ship came under fire from the LTTE. However, the ICRC said that firing near the supply ships was not unusual and that the relief workers were accustomed to this.